

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 26, 2021

The Honorable Barbara Lee
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on State,
Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hal Rogers
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on State,
Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Lucille Roybal-Allard
Chairwoman
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Fleischmann
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Homeland Security
House Committee on Appropriations
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Lee, Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and Ranking Member Rogers:

As you consider funding for Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, we urge you to help restore America's leadership in refugee resettlement by providing targeted funding to enable and accelerate video and audio teleconferencing for remote refugee interviews. We also respectfully request your support in reducing the growing backlog in Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing for Afghans and Iraqis who risked their lives aiding the United States. As the COVID-19 pandemic and security conditions continue to impede efforts to interview and process refugee and SIV applicants in person, technology provides an immediate relief as well as a long-term solution to increasingly challenging operating constraints.

Pursuant to [Executive Order 14013, Rebuilding and Enhancing Programs To Resettle Refugees and Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of State are permitted "the use of video and audio teleconferencing to conduct refugee interviews and establishing the necessary infrastructure to do so" in order to expand refugee vetting and adjudication capacity. The President also recognizes the SIV programs as essential in providing humanitarian protection to Iraqis and Afghans experiencing an ongoing, serious threat because of their service to the United States and instructs the U.S. government to administer these programs "without undue delay."

Unfortunately, the United States has admitted just 2,050 refugees halfway through FY 2021 and is on track to admit the lowest number of refugees on record. The Biden Administration has inherited a refugee resettlement operation that had been thoroughly dismantled and gutted by the Trump Administration. Trump's policies have brought the number of refugees admitted to a

historic low in FY 2020, in part by significantly diminishing USCIS ability to conduct in-person refugee interviews worldwide. In FY 2019, USCIS abruptly closed 16 of the 23 international offices that process refugee cases, amongst other essential humanitarian functions. In addition to bad policies, security conditions in certain locations, including in Iraq, have resulted in cancellations of planned USCIS refugee interviews. And due to limited resources, USCIS traditionally has prioritized economy of scale in terms of the applicant volumes in certain locations when planning for USCIS interviews overseas. This approach has excluded refugee applicants in inaccessible locations, for instance Beirut, or the one-off cases that have been admitted to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The COVID-19 pandemic has crippled further USCIS ability to conduct in-person interviews in the last 12 months.

The Iraqi and Afghan SIV programs play a vital role in protecting Iraqis and Afghans who are experiencing serious threats due to their work for the U.S. government. Despite Congress authorizing additional visas each year, visa issuances continue to be plagued by prolonged delays. More than 7,000 special visas allocated to Afghans by Congress in 2020 went unissued, and nearly 19,000 visa applications were stuck in processing as of September 2019. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul has begun a phased resumption of in-person visa interviews in February, nearly one year after closure due to the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, a [2020 Department of State OIG Report](#) determined that staffing levels to process Afghan SIVs have remained constant since FY 2016 and are insufficient to reduce the growing SIV applicant backlog. As a result, Afghan SIV applicants are facing an average wait time of three years and becoming increasingly exposed to retaliation by the Taliban and militant groups. Our nation owes these individuals a debt of gratitude, and we must process their applications with utmost haste and in compliance with existing law and statutory benchmarks.

For the DHS' **USCIS Operations and Support** account, we request that the Committee provide targeted funding necessary to enable and accelerate video and audio teleconferencing for remote refugee interviews.

We also encourage the Committee include in the SFOPS' **Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA)** account the following reporting language: *"We encourage the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to review with USCIS and the Bureau of Consular Affairs the use of video and audio teleconferencing technology to enable and accelerate remote refugee interviews."*

Finally, we request that the Committee allocate targeted funding in the **SFOPS' Consular and Border Security Programs** account to:

- increase staffing to the level necessary to reduce the SIV applicant backlog and to maintain pace with statutory benchmarks;
- provide for the appointment of a Senior Coordinating Official (Special Immigrant Visa Coordinator) with the sole responsibility of coordinating the SIV process in the State Department and across relevant U.S. agencies; and
- establish a unified database of information to aid with SIV applicant verification and processing.

We also encourage the Committee include in the **SFOPS' Consular and Border Security Programs** account the following reporting language: *"We encourage the Bureau of Consular*

Affairs to review with PRM and the Department of Defense the use of video and audio teleconferencing technology to improve and expedite special immigrant visa (SIV) processing.”

Thank you again for your commitment to the protection of the poor, voiceless, and persecuted, including the brave Iraqis and Afghans who have risked their lives in the service of this country. We look forward to working with you to restore America’s humanitarian leadership in the world.

Sincerely,



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Stephen F. Lynch
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress

/s/ Jake Auchincloss
Member of Congress

/s/ Ami Bera, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/ Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/ Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress

/s/ Jamaal Bowman, Ed.D.
Member of Congress

/s/ Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

/s/ André Carson
Member of Congress

/s/ Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Cooper
Member of Congress

/s/ Jason Crow
Member of Congress

/s/ Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

/s/ Mark DeSaulnier
Member of Congress

/s/ Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress

/s/ Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

/s/ Sara Jacobs
Member of Congress

/s/ Mondaire Jones
Member of Congress

/s/ William R. Keating
Member of Congress

/s/ Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

/s/ Zoe Lofgren
Member of Congress

/s/ Alan Lowenthal
Member of Congress

/s/ James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/ Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress

/s/ Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

/s/ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

/s/ Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

/s/ Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

/s/ Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress

/s/ Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

/s/ Mikie Sherrill
Member of Congress

/s/ Sohum Pawar
Member of Congress

/s/ Adam Smith
Member of Congress

/s/ Thomas R. Suozzi
Member of Congress

/s/ Rashida Tlaib
Member of Congress

/s/ Peter Welch
Member of Congress

/s/ Chuy García
Member of Congress